



Disability Awareness: Prevalence Rates of Disability Categories

Est. Time: 30-45 Minutes

Objective

1) To understand that the number of students receiving special education services varies by disability, and 2) to understand the concepts of high- and low-incidence disabilities.

Overview

Though the percentage of students with disabilities as part of the overall student population has fluctuated somewhat, it has nevertheless tended to remain within the 10–11% range. As the overall numbers of students with disabilities has increased, so, too, has the number of students in America. IDEA '04 enumerates thirteen special education categories (plus “developmental delay,” for which data are also collected) through which individualized services and supports can be provided:

Autism	Deaf-blindness	Deafness
Emotional disturbance	Hearing impairment	Intellectual disability
Multiple disabilities	Orthopedic impairment	Other health impairment
Specific learning disability	Speech or language impairment	Traumatic brain injury
Visual impairment	Developmental delay	

Rates of identification within these categories vary greatly. Students may find that their assumptions regarding the prevalence of certain disabilities are influenced by their personal experiences (or lack thereof) or by the news media. In this activity, students will examine the national prevalence rates of each disability category using data from the 2010–2011 school year.

Activity

1. Pass out the attached worksheet and ask the students to use only their prior knowledge to identify which disabilities are high-incidence and which are low-incidence.
2. Ask students to calculate the percentage of all public school students served under each disability category (disability category/ all public school students x 100).
3. Ask students to calculate the percentage of all students with disabilities served under each disability category (disability category/ all disabilities x 100).



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Questions/Discussion Topics

1. Compare the number of students receiving services under each disability category. Which disability category is the most prevalent? The least?
2. Which of these categories do you think would be considered high-incidence disabilities and which would be considered low-incidence disabilities
3. Having calculated the percentages of all schoolchildren with each disability and the percentages of all students with disabilities within each category, have your answers to Question 2 changed? Why or why not?
4. Were you surprised by any of the actual prevalence numbers? Explain.

¹ Terms used by the federal government do not always match those preferred by education professionals and those with disabilities. For example, “mental retardation” is now referred to as “intellectual disability” or “cognitive disability.”

² This is the most recent academic term for which complete data are available, obtained from the Part B data from <http://www.ideadata.org> and the Schools and Staffing Survey from <http://nces.ed.gov>



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Number of Students Ages 6–21 Served under IDEA during the 2010 School Year

Disability	Fall 2010	% of all public school students	% of all students with disabilities
Total number of students enrolled U.S. public schools	49,484,181		
Total number of students with disabilities	5,830,191	11.78%	100%
Autism	370,344		
Deaf-blindness	1,282		
Developmental delay	109,293		
Emotional disturbance	388,023		
Hearing impairments	69,839		
Mental retardation (intellectual disabilities)	445,432		
Multiple disabilities	123,576		
Orthopedic impairments	55,787		
Other health impairments	705,764		
Specific learning disabilities	2,417,208		
Speech or language impairments	1,144,277		
Traumatic brain injury	24,664		
Visual impairments	25,686		

Sources:

2010 Public school enrollment data: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_036.asp

2010 IDEA data: <http://tadnet.public.tadnet.org/pages/712>